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ABSTRACT

This study involving 120 fifth grade and 120 kindergarten children (all middle class) was designed to assess the extent to which children's understanding of observed violence as fantasy (fictional), as opposed to real (documentary), influences their subsequent aggressive behavior. Children were exposed to a violent televised episode that was introduced as a fictional portrayal (fantasy condition) or as a news broadcast (reality condition). Additional groups were given no information (no instructional set condition) about the violent stimulus or were not exposed to the violent episode (no-T.V. condition). Aggressive responses and helping responses were recorded immediately following exposure. Boys were most aggressive in the reality and no-T.V. conditions. They were less aggressive in the no-instructional set condition and least aggressive in the fantasy condition. In almost direct contrast, girls were most aggressive in the fantasy and no-instructional set conditions and least aggressive in the reality and no-T.V. conditions. These effects held for both older and younger children. The findings are discussed in terms of differences in the socialization of boys and girls for real and fantasy aggression. (Author/JMB)

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The Fantasy-Reality Distinction in Televised Violence: Modifying Influences on Children's Aggression

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The Fantasy-Reality Distinction in Televised Violence:

Modifying Influences on Children's Aggression

Abstract

Fifth-grade and kindergarten boys and girls were exposed to a violent televised episode that was introduced as a fictional portrayal (fantasy condition) or as a news broadcast (reality condition). Additional groups were given no information (no instructional set condition) about the violent stimulus or were not exposed to the violent episode (no-T.V. condition). Aggressive responses and helping responses were recorded immediately following exposure. Boys were most aggressive in the reality and no-T.V. conditions. They were less aggressive in the no-instructional set condition and least aggressive in the fantasy condition. In almost direct contrast, girls were most aggressive in the fantasy and no-instructional set conditions and least aggressive in the reality and no-T.V. conditions. These effects held for both older and younger children. The findings are discussed in terms of differences in the socialization of boys and girls for real and fantasy aggression.

The fantasy-reality distinction in televised violence: Modifying influences on children's aggression

The content of televised violence can be ordered along a fantasy-reality dimension based on the viewer's perception of the fictitiousness vs. authenticity of the portrayed events. The endpoints of this continuum are represented by factual news reports of "real world" events on the reality end and by fictional, dramatic portrayals of imaginary, created events on the fictional end. The degree of perceived similarity between media content and the viewers own life circumstances has been proposed as a determinant of the impact the observed events will have on the viewer's behavior (Bandura, 1962; Berkowitz, 1962; Feshbach, 1972).

The research described here was designed to assess the extent to which children's understanding of observed violence as fantasy (fictional), as opposed to real (documentary), influences their subsequent aggressive behavior. Investigations of this issue with adult males (Berkowitz & Alioto, 1973) and with preadolescent boys and girls (Feshbach, 1972) have found that aggressive responding was lower following exposure to filmed violence that was introduced as fictional than following exposure to the same violent stimulus when it was introduced as a documentary. However, these effects have not been studied developmentally and, since fantasy versus reality appears to be a less relevant distinction in the thinking and behavior of younger children (Isaacs, 1966; Lottan, 1967; Taylow & Howell, 1973), we do not know whether the fantasy-reality issue for television effects is a significant parameter of young children's aggressive reactions to media violence. Further, earlier studies of this issue have failed to include a control condition in which subjects are given no information

about the nature of the violent stimulus film. This procedure is necessary to establish baseline levels of aggressive responding to the violent stimulus in the absence of cognitive structuring information.

In the present study, 120 fifth-grade children and 120 kindergarten children (all were middle-class) were assigned to treatment combinations in a 4 (experimental condition) X 2 (grade) X 2 (sex) factorial design with equal numbers of subjects per cell (n=15). The experimental conditions were 1) reality instructional set, 2) fantasy instructional set, 3) no instructional set, and 4) no television exposure.

The subjects were brought individually from their classrooms to a laboratory trailer adjacent to the school. After a brief rapport period, subjects were informed that they would be asked to operate a control panel that was connected to a difficult "space maze" (labyrinth game) task that another (unfamiliar) child would be operating in another room of the trailer in order to win a prize. The control panel was the Help-Hurt apparatus used by Liebert and Baron, 1972. Briefly, the face of the panel contained a small signal light (to indicate trials) and two response buttons: one was green and one was labeled HELP; the other was red and labeled HURT. The children were told that when they pushed the green button, they would "help" the other child to win the prize by making his/her task easier to do; and that if they pushed the red button, they would "hurt" the other child's chances to win the prize by making the task harder to do. The other child's space maze task was then demonstrated for the subject and he/she was given an opportunity to operate it under both the "easier" (help) and "harder" (hurt) conditions.

When it was clear that the subjects understood the operation of the other child's task and the procedures for the signal lights and help-hurt buttons, the fantasy-reality instructional set manipulation was instituted. Subjects in the television exposure conditions were told that since the other child had not yet arrived, they could watch television for a little while. Children in the no-T.V. condition were provided with several nature booklets with pictures and text that were pretested for interest value at both ages and for both sexes.

Before the television set was turned on, subjects in the fantasy set condition were told that a police show was on and that it was a made-up story about a big fight that didn't really happen. They were told that the characters were movie actors pretending to be in a fight and that the program was made in a studio in Hollywood. Subjects in the reality set condition were told that a news program was on now and that they were reporting about a big fight that had happened recently. They were told that the fight was photographed by news photographers who were there when it happened and saw the people who were actually in the fight. They were assured that it wasn't just pretend. The children in the no instructional set condition were told that they would see a big fight but were provided with no explanations about the nature of the presentation. A manipulation check obtained in the post-experiment interview confirmed that the pre-exposure instructions were remembered by all the subjects.

Immediately following the instructional set manipulation, the same stimulus film was shown to subjects in the T.V. exposure conditions. It depicted a brief (six minute) episode of a campus riot in which the cues are ambiguous regarding the fictional or real nature of the film (Feshbach, 1972). Near the end of the film clip, the experimenter opened and closed the

back door of the trailer out of sight of the subject. In a loud voice, the experimenter welcomed a nonexistent, same-sex child by name and told him/her to get ready to do the space maze task. The experimenter then came back into the room with the subject, told him/her that the other child was ready to work on the task, reminded him/her about the operation of the help-hurt apparatus, and told the subject to begin when the signal light went on. The primary dependent measure was the average duration (duration/frequency) per block of five trials of Hurt responses over a series of 20 fifteen-second trials (Liebert & Baron, 1972). These scores were submitted to a four-factor Anova: experimental condition X grade X sex X blocks of trials (four blocks of five trials each).

In addition to a main effect for sex of child which indicated that boys were more aggressive than girls [$F(1,224) = 5.09$; $p = .025$], a significant interaction of sex of child and experimental condition was obtained [$F(3,224) = 3.97$; $p = .009$]. The means from this interaction effect are presented in Figure 1. For boys, the lowest levels of aggressive responding were in the fantasy condition and the highest levels were in the reality condition and the no T.V. condition; exposure to violent T.V. with no instructional set resulted in intermediate levels of aggression. In almost direct contrast to the boys, the lowest levels of aggressive responding among the girls were in the reality condition and the no-T.V. condition and the highest levels were in the fantasy and no instructional set conditions.

Subsequent comparisons of the means involved in this interaction using the Duncan Multiple Range procedure (Winer, 1971) indicated that in both the reality and no T.V. conditions, males responded more aggressively than females ($p < .05$). Further, there was a marginally significant difference

between the means for the reality and fantasy conditions for boys ($.05 < p < .10$) which indicated more aggressive responding in the reality condition and which replicates the findings of other investigators with adult males (Berkowitz & Alioto, 1973) and preadolescent males (Feshbach, 1972).

For girls, a marginally significant difference between the means for the reality and no instructional set conditions ($.05 < p < .10$) indicated less aggressive responding in the reality condition. This marginally significant difference is noted here since it is not consistent with the findings from the Feshbach (1972) study which indicated that girls as well as boys were more aggressive in the very similar reality condition of that study.

Also noteworthy in the findings of this study is that the grade level of the children (kindergarten vs. fifth grade) was not involved in either main effects nor interaction effects. That is, the experimental effects in interaction with the sex of the children was similar for the younger children and the older children. Apparently, providing children, even as young as five and six years old, with information about the nature of the content of televised violence along the fantasy reality dimension serves to modify their subsequent aggressive responding.

How might the differences between boys' and girls' responses to fantasy and reality television violence be explained? One possible explanation is differences in the way boys and girls are socialized about aggressive behavior by parents and peers. Though this post hoc hypothesis warrants empirical confirmation, it seems reasonable to argue that girls are more frequently punished for real aggressive outbursts than they are for their fantasy enactments of aggressive activities in play, especially doll play.

For boys, real aggressive outbursts are more tolerated by parents and peers, and fantasy enactments of aggression with dolls or in play with peers are more apt to meet with punishment by being labeled "sissy stuff." This differential socialization of boys and girls for different types of aggressive behavior would be the antecedent social influence that is consistent with the findings in this study that boys inhibited imitation of fantasy aggression whereas girls were more apt to inhibit imitation of real aggression.

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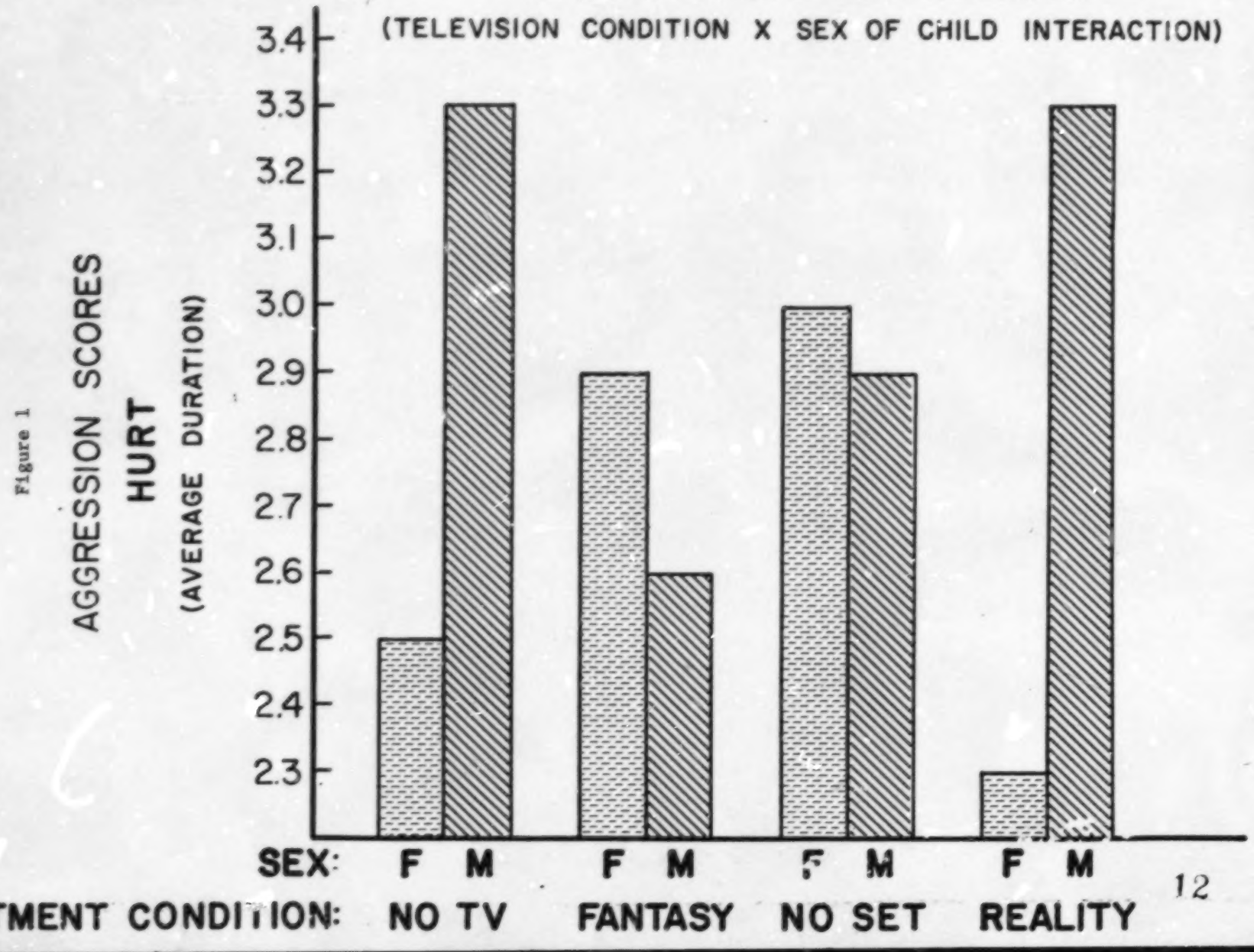
Figure 1


FANTASY AND REALITY TELEVISION EFFECTS
ON CHILDREN'S AGGRESSION
(TELEVISION CONDITION X SEX OF CHILD INTERACTION)
AGGRESSION SCORES
HURT
(AVERAGE DURATION)
3.4
3.3
3.2
3.1
3.0
2.9
2.8
2.7
2.6
2.5
2.4
2.3
SEX: F M F M F M F M
TREATMENT CONDITION: NO TV FANTASY NO SET REALITY